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ABSTRACT

This experiment in adult learning processes was carried out in a course in applied linguistics in which the students were teachers with experience in teaching English as a foreign language. Consideration of the importance of process in such a situation derived from dissatisfaction with the lecture and tutor-led seminar methods, from the composition of the study body, a desire to link class work and the final evaluation, and the link between course content and methodology. A nine-step procedure was worked out consisting of teacher presentation and participation, small group study, reading, and presentation of several topics. The entire class was expected to be familiar with all the readings in order to be able to participate in the discussions led by the group that was responsible for a particular topic. The final step was an entire class seminar. The procedure is considered preferable to a teacher-dominated class. Student evaluations indicated that the course had achieved its aims of increasing motivation and participation, and involving the students in the process of their own learning. It was also evident that there had been a considerable "carry-over" effect to produce a high level of content knowledge. (AMH)

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Process and Product in Higher Education: Student - Directed Learning

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Introduction

This article is an account of an attempt to respond to a particular teaching problem by seeking a methodology which stressed the process of learning as much as the acquisition of product or content. The methodology, involving student-directed learning groups, is described and evaluated, particular attention being paid to the students' comments, obtained by questionnaire.

Before describing the teaching problem which is the topic of this article I wish to outline the context in which the problem arose. A section of the English Department of Birmingham University, specialising in post-experience courses in Applied Linguistics, has recently launched a Masters' course in Applied Linguistics aimed particularly at teachers of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL). The teachers are generally in mid-career, all with experience of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), mostly native-speakers of English working abroad for business organisations, the British Council, ODA, or foreign Ministries of Education, who recognise the need for a Masters' qualification to up-date their knowledge of the subject at a theoretical level and enhance their career prospects.

The innovatory nature of the course is that it is based on a 'sandwich' principle of alternating short but intensive periods of study in Birmingham with research work undertaken in the students' 'home' institution. The course lasts two years with one period of ten weeks being spent in Birmingham each year. The course outline looks something like this:

Phase 1	9 months	preparatory course (in post)
Phase 2	10 weeks	Birmingham
Phase 3	9 months	research projects (in post)
Phase 4	10 weeks	Birmingham.

During Phases 2 and 4 the students are presented with a series of courses (lectures and seminars) in Applied Linguistics. Phase 2 work develops the preparatory Phase 1 course and prepares for the Phase 3 research projects. Part of the Phase 2 work is a short course in sociolinguistics, given by the writer, which is the subject of this paper.

The problem

A number of course objectives related to content can already be inferred from the description of the MA programme given above. One of these was

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to provide an introductory course in sociolinguistics which was to relate to concepts already introduced in Phase 1 and provide input for possible Phase 3 research work. The content was to be relevant to issues in TEFL/TESL and to provide links with other parts of the course. From these general objectives a list of topics was produced. These objectives and consequent topics are *product*-oriented; they refer to content and are not concerned either with the means by which content is to be transmitted or with the broader educational objectives of improving participants' skills as learners, both of which we may describe as *process*-oriented (Stenhouse, 1975, pp. 84-97). Consideration of process is important, firstly because it may lead to a more effective methodology and hence greater content mastery, secondly because the learning process itself may have beneficial educational effects.

The first element in this consideration of process was the writer's own dissatisfaction with the lecture and the traditional 'tutor-led' seminar. Both these modes tend to be more concerned with product than process. The lecture mode particularly leads to passive rather than active learning. Tutor-led seminars tend to emphasise the 'recipient' role of students, one result being that it is difficult to get the students to undertake the required reading – they know the tutor will always be present to keep the seminar going if they do not talk because they have not completed the reading. A slight modification of the tutor-led approach is to select one student to be responsible for the presentation. This does not overcome the problem of non-participation – the burden is now placed on one individual who has to take the strain of presenting readings to the whole group.

The search for a more process-oriented approach was also encouraged by a number of factors specific to the nature of the MA programme and its students.

The first concerned the numbers of participants and the influence of time constraints. The class consisted of 21 students, the period of residence was 10 weeks and the sociolinguistics course consisted of 8 scheduled 1½-hour seminars. A method therefore had to be adopted that would enable the topics to be covered in sufficient depth and ensure the fullest contributions from participants. There was also the additional social aim, important to successful learning at any level, of getting to know the participants as quickly as possible.

A second factor concerned the participants themselves. All had teaching experience in a variety of situations and roles at home and overseas. It would be of benefit to all to make each individual's experience and expertise available to the class as a whole and apply it to the theoretical concepts being discussed, the novelty and complexity of which could be made more accessible if related to experience. There was also the fairly obvious point that use could be made of the participants' teaching skills.

Moreover, in dealing with teachers on post-experience courses of this nature, the writer has found that participants can experience shock on joining a course. This may be partly due to a feeling of insecurity, caused both by a change in role ('teachers' now becoming 'students') and also by a sudden re-assessment of perhaps long-cherished opinions and practices in education. The more ways could be found to relieve this tension, the better.

A third factor was that the MA programme and its various courses, including the one which is the subject of this paper, would be assessed. It had been noted previously that other students who have been away from academic life some time become so anxious about formal assessment that examination performance can be adversely affected. Some way was sought therefore to ease this anxiety by integrating the teaching and the final test, so that the assessment would be seen as a logical non-threatening extension of the course.

A fourth factor was the link between course content and methodology. Much of EFL methodology, influenced by educational curriculum theory, is concerned with a process approach (Breen and Candlin, 1980). Other courses on the MA programme were dealing with this topic, but were talking about the principle in theory; it seemed an opportunity to involve the participants in process-oriented learning in practice. (Todd, 1981, makes a similar point about the value of 'learning by doing' in relation to staff development programmes.)

The solution

It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that a learner-directed approach is unsystematic and unstructured. This is not the case. It requires careful planning and monitoring by the lecturer/tutor and a detailed framework of organisation (Goldschmid and Goldschmid, 1976). Within the framework, there is less control but without the infra-structure, the enterprise quickly becomes chaotic. Moreover, learner-directed activities demand a great deal from the lecturer (D'Arcy, 1980). I make this point to counteract any suggestion that it is a soft option or that it saves the lecturer's time. Experience suggests, and a formal study of this would prove valuable, that any saving of a lecturer's time, when compared with other methods of teaching, is negligible if the whole process is to be carried out effectively. A learner-directed procedure is inoperable without structure, planning and detailed organisation.

The description which follows is not prescriptive. The procedure worked well, but it is realised that alternative strategies are possible at each step.

Step 1: The course lasted for 8 weeks, one topic being covered in a 1½-hour session each week. The lecturer prepared a list of weekly topics and for each recommended 3 or 4 readings. A question was posed on each topic

which was to be the subject of the relevant seminar session. This gave the seminar and the reading a purpose. The lecturer gave a brief explanation of the topics and an outline of the teaching method and course organisation.

Step 2: The participants 'signed up' for one of the topics, creating one group per topic. The first person to sign under each topic was designated chairman for the group, a crucial role, as we shall see later.

Step 3: The chairman of each group was given a folder containing photocopies of the required reading. (Further copies were available in the departmental resources room and, if the readings were from journals or books, from the university library.) Steps 1-3 took one session.

Step 4: The chairman of each group distributed the readings and arranged a meeting for the group to discuss the readings.

Step 5: The individuals in the group read the articles. (All participants following the course were naturally expected to undertake the reading as well.)

Step 6: The group met, *without the lecturer*, to discuss the readings and the manner of presentation to the whole class.

Step 7: The group met the lecturer to discuss:

(a) what they had read
(b) their presentation plan
(c) any problems arising from (a) and/or (b) that they would like is resolved.

Step 8: The group prepared for the class presentation.

Step 9: The group presented their findings to the whole class. (Steps 4-9 were repeated each week by the group responsible for that week's topic.)

Discussion of the procedure

Notice that once the structure of the course has been defined (Steps 1-3 above), the learning/teaching is almost entirely in the hands of the participants (Steps 4-9) both as regards acquisition of content and the means of communicating that content to the whole class. Only in Steps 7 and 9 is the lecturer present, and then more as a co-participant than a leader.

What follows is a discussion of a number of points arising from the teaching of the course.

1. There is a case for including a lecture presentation in Step 1, to give students more information on which to base their topic choices.

2. Ideally, each group should have consisted of three or four participants, so that each person in the group could get to know one topic in depth. As it happened, individuals signed up for more than one topic, bringing some of the groups up to six or seven members. This probably affected the efficiency of the group work, but it seemed at the time unwise to discourage participation or to be too prescriptive. In future, however, in order to obtain

maximum effectiveness in group work, members in each group should be kept to the three or four planned.

3. One variation in Step 3 that increases student autonomy still further is to get the students to find the articles and books on the list of topics rather than copies being provided by the lecturer (Todd and Todd, 1979). Since the class was severely constrained by time and this aspect of study skills was not an aim of the course, this option was not implemented.

4. The group discussion without the lecturer present (Step 6) is difficult to evaluate. Ideally, observation of groups could be undertaken operating a system of recording as suggested by Beach (1974), to find out what roles the particpants adopted and the content of the discussions.

5. The group discussions with the tutor present (Step 7) were interesting in that the talk tended to centre around means rather than content, i.e. how the content was to be presented to the class. This session turned out to be an important 'control' system when the lecturer was able to sustain motivation and clarify any problems the students had. The lecturer has to be willing to take on the role of co-participant in these discussions, though he may act as an informal chairman. It is important that his own ideas should not dominate and that he should be willing to have his own viewpoint overridden. These sessions varied. In one session, the first, the group had not been able to synthesize the readings and the meeting was almost entirely concerned with content. The other sessions consisted of a clarification of points and discussion of the means to communicate content and obtain the participation of the rest of the class in the final seminar. There were decisions to be made concerning timing, use of handouts, group work, and allocation of teaching responsibilities. These decisions, though concerned with means, were made taking content into account. For example, if a student wanted to include details from a particular article, he would have to justify his case for the inclusion of that particular content. It would be useful if these discussions could be taped and analysed so that evaluation could be based on more objective evidence.

6. It was in Step 9, when the group presented the material to the whole class, that the full value of the preparatory sessions became evident. In these sessions, the focus shifted to peer-teaching with the presenting group as the teachers. What was most gratifying in these sessions was the high level of participation and the quality of discussion from all participants. This was achieved through two types of presentation. In Type 1 a member of the group presented a summary of one of the set readings. This was followed by class discussion. The same procedure was followed for the other readings. These summaries were often accompanied by handouts listing the main points. In Type 2, a short (maximum 20 minutes) summary of the readings was presented, together with a handout. The class was then divided into four or five groups and presented with a problem (written up

on a handout) related to the topic. A spokesman for each group would summarise its findings and conclusions which would be followed by whole-class discussion.

Type 2 sessions were particularly successful in terms of participation and discussion of the issues. A particularly interesting session was devised to discuss issues relating to mother-tongue teaching provision for ethnic minorities in Britain, currently a subject of much emotional debate. For this session the class was divided into four groups, representing the views of applied linguists, teachers, parents and local education authorities respectively. The groups were to present their particular viewpoints on mother-tongue teaching. Detailed handouts were provided summarising the pros and cons of the issue which were used by the groups in formulating proposals they subsequently presented to the whole class. This format led to much conflict and debate as each group presented the views of different interested parties (i.e., linguists, parents, teachers, administrators) and proved a most effective way of revealing the complexity of the topics to the class.

Evaluation of the methodology

A questionnaire was submitted to the students after the course. Sixteen out of the twenty-one papers distributed were completed and returned.

Question 1 asked whether the content of the course should be changed. The figures indicated a general satisfaction with course content, with a majority either wanting more time for a particular topic or satisfied with the allocation. The questionnaire then asked for comments on Steps 6, 7 and 9. The respondents were asked to write down what they had seen as the aims and objectives of the sessions and whether they thought they had been achieved.

Step 6 (small-group meeting; tutor not present)

The aims as seen by the whole class for this part of the exercise were as follows, listed in order of frequency of mention:

(a) exchange information gained from the readings
(b) decide on a manner of presentation to the whole class and delegate areas of responsibility
(c) clarify problems
(d) identify areas of agreement and interest
(e) establish a working relationship
(f) apply the content to own teaching experience
(g) note points to be discussed later with the lecturer
(h) give everyone a chance to contribute
(i) learn from each other
(j) learn to work in a group.

The replies range from content-oriented (a) and pedagogic aims (b), to those concerned with the process of learning (i, j), and those of a more socio-psychological nature (d, h). It is interesting to note that the major aims (defined in terms of frequency of response) related to content (a) and to the means of communicating content to the whole class (b). Even (a), however, is not purely content-based, as 'exchanging information' implies also a concern with social processes.

In answer to the question whether the aims of the small-group 'teacherless' sessions had been achieved, opinion was divided. Seven people responded positively. Nine, however, gave a qualified response. Mention was made of time constraints, which prevented the achievement of both (a) and (b). It is difficult to evaluate this since no time limit was given to the groups, except of course that their presentation had to be ready for the whole-class seminar. In retrospect, it would have been informative to have discovered how much time each group had spent on this stage of the work.

One respondent mentioned a lack of discipline in the discussion at this stage and another the dominance of the group's chairman, who took over the discussion and prevented a consensus being reached. Another respondent commented that it would be better if each member of the group read all the readings, rather than sharing them out. However, the main reason given for the qualified success of the group work was the size of the group. It has been mentioned above that individuals had signed up for more than one topic, increasing the group size from a planned 3/4 to 6/7 individuals, which in the light of the comments is too large. The comments about discipline and dominance point to the necessity to record the group interactions if at all possible, in order to discover just what occurs and to evaluate the sessions on a more objective basis.

Step 7 (small-group meeting; tutor present)

The aims and objectives, as revealed by the questionnaire, again fell into two main categories, those concerned with topic *content* and those with the *means* of presentation to the whole class. The list below shows the aims in order of frequency of mention.

CONTENT-RELATED	MEANS-RELATED
(a) check understanding of readings with tutor	(a) check presentation plan
(b) establish main points	(b) finalise presentation plan
(c) discuss readings	(c) obtain tutor help with plan
(d) express understanding	(d) negotiate plan
(e) synthesise readings	(e) inform tutor of plan.
(f) obtain further information from tutor	

(g) inform tutor of content
(h) clarify comprehension
(i) have problems indicated by tutor.

A number of the aims in the Table above may overlap but they have deliberately not been conflated as they illustrate clearly what the students thought should be the function of the small-group sessions and the respective roles of tutor and student. Notice the number of functions which involve the group in constant interaction with each other: discussing, synthesising, negotiating, for example. These skills, requiring a high level of fluency and cognitive ability, involve the participants in putting forward ideas, modifying them, justifying their opinions and reaching a consensus. Here the tutor's role is one of co-participant in the discussion and discreet chairman facilitating the final outcome. The direction of talk is very much student to student.

Looking at the Table, we can discern three further types of interaction. The first type is the tutor as evaluator, with the students providing information and having it checked by the tutor. This 'checking' aim is the one most frequently mentioned by students. It is a modification of the more traditional teacher role of information-giver. Here, the students provide information, the teacher giving feedback.

In the second type of interaction, the tutor takes on the role of information-giver. But notice that the information is requested by the students. Whereas in the traditional seminar, the tutor provides the information he thinks his students need, in this case, the students tell the tutor what information they require. The final type of interaction is again student-dominated with the group informing the tutor of the proposed content of the whole-class seminar and the method of teaching. This type requires considerable skill on the part of the tutor, as he must judge whether this is a true 'inform' which the students wish to have accepted with no further discussion or whether he is being asked to act as evaluator. Problems can arise if the former is true but the tutor feels that he cannot entirely accept the idea. Any case the tutor puts forward against a proposal has to be introduced delicately and if the students remain unconvinced the tutor may have to accept their plans. Any outright veto from the tutor would damage the students' sense of purpose and take away from them the very autonomy and responsibility for their own learning which the course has been developing.

All respondents to the questionnaire thought the objectives had been achieved. It is interesting to compare this unqualified positive response with the reservations reported in the case of the small-group meetings without the tutor present. (See evaluation of Step 6 above.) It may be that the latter

sessions suffered from the lack of a chairman of sufficient experience and status and indicates the importance already mentioned of recording the seminars to see what actually happened. Recent work on the discourse analysis of seminars would provide useful analytical models (see Mead, 1981).

Step 9 (whole-class seminar)

The participants were asked to evaluate the final whole-class seminar in which the group responsible for the topic undertook the presentation. The Table below shows the aims of these sessions as seen by the participants. Notice the replies indicate that, at this stage, the participants are as much concerned with 'process' as with 'product' aims.

PRODUCT-AIMS	PROCESS AIMS
(a) present content of readings to to the class and communicate the issues in manageable form	(a) learn through discussion
(b) integrate the new information with participants' previous experience.	(b) create opportunities for small-group learning
	(c) get everyone sharing experiences
	(d) exchange ideas and views
	(e) stimulate thought
	(f) gain experience of teaching/ conducting seminars.

It may be that the twin objectives, one related to product, the other to process, were successfully integrated in this case because the participants were mature, experienced teachers themselves, although it should be said that the style of teaching that they were exposed to in this course was a new experience to a number who were used to more traditional teacher-dominated classrooms. It is not certain whether non-teachers would accept as readily such a process-oriented course. In some ways, they might prove more ready to experiment as they would have no preconceived notions of what teaching should be, although they might need more direction and guidance from the tutor.

As to whether the aims had been achieved, in general the replies were positive but with some qualificatory remarks. These were concerned mainly with the questions of class size and time constraints. Some felt that a class size of twenty-one constrained discussion. This was indeed the case and was the reason behind the extensive use of group work both prior to and in the whole-class sessions. However, the fact that there were still comments

might indicate that even the group work did not entirely overcome the problem. Time was undoubtedly a constraint. Each whole-class session was scheduled to last 1½ hours. All overran and two whole sessions were added to the course at the request of participants so that discussion could continue. A comment was made, on a related point, that the success of the whole-class seminar correlated with the ability of the topic group, and particularly the group's leader, to run the seminar. This was clearly the case and relates to a further point about the role of the tutor in the whole-class seminars. The strategy of giving responsibility to the groups for running the seminars worked well and ensured that each group came to the seminar well-prepared. However, it did mean that if anything did start to go wrong (for example, timing of activities) it was difficult for the tutor to re-assert his authority without undermining the principles on which the seminar had been based. A tactic which worked reasonably well was to discreetly indicate the problem to the group leader and let him/her take the decision. This is an aspect of the tutor's role which would merit further study. A further comment on timing problems was that there was no time for a sufficiently comprehensive summing-up at the end of the seminar. This was true and is a feature that could most conveniently be taught by the tutor.

Some respondents thought that more material should have been presented and that the summaries provided by the group were not comprehensive enough. Underlying this comment is a basic worry common to most seminar situations and which the methodology described here attempted to resolve. It is whether the class had in fact completed the prescribed readings by the time of the whole-class seminars or not. If the class had not done the reading, then the topic group would in effect be introducing new material which would account for the complaint that the summary was not detailed enough. This may have indeed been the case as the class was under pressure from other parts of the course, some problems were experienced in obtaining the readings, and ironically, the topic groups became very proficient in their presentations, perhaps inducing the feeling in some students that their own reading was not so essential. If, on the other hand, the class had done the reading, then the topic group would be introducing issues already known for subsequent discussions which was of course the original idea. There is no doubt that each group did more reading on their topic and came to the final seminar more fully informed than is usually the case with a more traditional seminar, but whether this was also the case for the whole class is a matter for further investigation.

The participants were asked to comment on the teaching styles adopted by the presenting group. All respondents except three thought the best format was a short introduction by members of the presenting group, followed by the class working in groups, then a whole-class discussion.

The three exceptions preferred the systematic input of a lecturette given by each member of the presenting group. One person suggested two sessions: the first consisting of a 40-60 minute lecture to the whole class, followed a few days later by the presenting group leading a discussion with two halves of the class.

However, as indicated, the existing format was well received by the majority. A number of useful comments were made, listing the conditions which should be fulfilled for these final seminars to work well. They were:

(a) the group work should be carefully directed and controlled
(b) the group work should not be too long (20 minutes was suggested as a maximum)
(c) there should be enough input for the groups to work on
(d) the task to be completed by the groups should be clear and explicit
(e) each group should always report back to the whole class
(f) there should always be a summary and drawing together of the arguments.

Course evaluation

The participants were finally asked to evaluate the course as a whole. Few negative comments were made and they tended to be of an administrative nature (e.g., readings should be more readily available).

The advantages of the approach which the participants listed were as follows:

(a) the method encouraged a high level of participation and activity
(b) it involved people in the process of learning
(c) it was enjoyable
(d) it encouraged group work
(e) it was thought-provoking
(f) it increased group cohesion
(g) it increased involvement in the subject area
(h) individuals were able to study one topic in depth and cover other topics sufficiently well to gain a broad view of the issues.

Notice again the participants' concern reflected in the list with the process of learning (a-f) as well as the product (g and h).

Link with formal assessment (product-based)

A final aspect of the evaluation was the written examination which was held at the end of the ten-week period to assess the complete phase 2 of the MA programme. The examination was a traditional essay-type format and was content-based. Ultimately, if the process-influenced approach to learning described here is to be of value it must amongst other things increase

the participants' grasp of content. It was significant that, although the format of the question paper was such that the area of sociolinguistics represented by the course described could have been avoided, 13 of the 21 participants chose to answer the sociolinguistics section of the paper, a higher number than on any other section. There could be many reasons for this of course, but such a choice might at least point towards a confidence in those who made the choice that they felt prepared for this part of the examination, and that the anxiety previously noticed had in this case been reduced. Moreover, the answers were of a high standard, showing not only a grasp of individual topics, but an ability to draw on all parts of the sociolinguistics course, to evaluate arguments and justify opinions. There was admittedly no control group against which to judge the results. However, the writer's experience of teaching and examining such courses over a number of years would suggest at the least that there was no lowering of standards and quite posibly a raising of them, as measured in this case by an essay-type examination. This is, admittedly, a subjective assessment but one which is supported by more objective research evidence elsewhere (Collier, 1980).

In summary, the writer's own assessment and the results of the questionnaire indicated that the course had achieved its aims of increasing motivation and participation and involving the students in the process of their own learning. There was also evidence that there had been a considerable 'carry-over' effect to produce a high level of content knowledge. One of the valuable outcomes was the amount of detailed information which the students revealed about their learning and the course in the questionnaire and the many helpful and original ideas for further teaching. The study also revealed the necessity for a discourse analysis of the small-group interactions both with and without the tutor present so that student and tutor problems can be isolated and remedied and profiles drawn up of successful and unsuccessful sessions.

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